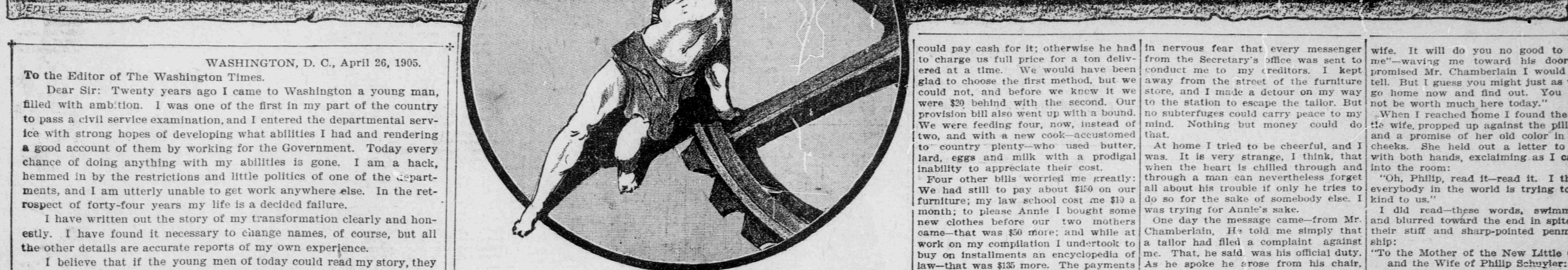


The Life Story of a Department Clerk



WASHINGTON, D. C., April 26, 1905.

To the Editor of The Washington Times.

Dear Sir: Twenty years ago I came to Washington a young man, filled with ambition. I was one of the first in my part of the country to pass a civil service examination, and I entered the departmental service with strong hopes of developing what abilities I had and rendering a good account of them by working for the Government. Today every chance of doing anything with my abilities is gone. I am a hack, hemmed in by the restrictions and little politics of one of the departments, and I am utterly unable to get work anywhere else. In the retrospect of forty-four years my life is a decided failure.

I have written out the story of my transformation clearly and honestly. I have found it necessary to change names, of course, but all the other details are accurate reports of my own experience.

I believe that if the young men of today could read my story, they would find it a powerful warning against entering the service where individual ability counts for nothing, or almost nothing, and ambition is stifled beyond hope. For that reason I hope you can find room in your paper for the inclosed, with the understanding that, if you use it, you are to edit out none of the facts. If you cannot use it, please return to the address on the inclosed slip.

Very truly yours,

A COG IN THE WHEEL.

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

In "The first days of the civil service"—away back in the eighties—the author, of the Life Story of a Department Clerk, a young Indiana lawyer, came to Washington to accept a clerkship in the office of the Assistant Attorney General, having "the dreamiest sort of a dream" that he had planned his way into the office of the Attorney General.

He describes his entry into the service of the Government and the shocks to his dignity, administered not only by the "lordly watchman," but by future associates.

He tells how he plunged into the routine work of applying "the little law" in printed pamphlets to letters of inquiry.

The reader is made acquainted with his roommates, the chief, a man of fifty or fifty-five years, short, and half fat, over-heavy in manner with puffing eyelids, unkempt, profane, a hard drinker, a gambler, kind to everyone, a lawyer by courtesy only, and one who owes his position to a campaign speech; the second in authority, Mr. Macpherson, a tall, extremely taciturn, thin-lipped, difficult-to-approach individual, "a lawyer by virtue of a general legal knowledge as extended and accurate," says the writer, "as any I have ever encountered," an Irishman, O'Mara, about thirty years old, "seats himself at a desk and writes, and a fine advertising agent of his own talents," who knew little law, spent much time in "grazing the green," and who died the "Dimmycrats" to put him out; a widow, Mrs. Errol, who was appointed through the influence of her husband's friends, and an unmarried woman, "the Dragonfly," who seemed to be a member of the National Senate.

The first year passes by before the author realizes it. He enjoys "living the life" in a big city, which affords diversions unattainable in the small community from which he came. Nevertheless he does not devote all his spare moments to pastime, for he pursues his studies in the endeavor to get a diploma from a school of law. So passes the first winter and the next.

Then comes an event which brings about a change in all. The chief of the division dies, and O'Mara becomes his successor, although fellow-clerks believe Macpherson entitled to the promotion. "Yes, it is Mr. O'Mara, and I'm sorry you are disappointed," says the appointee in noting the look of surprise on the face of the writer. Macpherson quickly makes arrangements to leave the division, and the writer takes steps to do likewise. His judgment tells him to go back home. His pride urges him to stay. He catches the "department fever," and obtains a transfer, O'Mara lending him aid. He learns with surprise that his new position is a clerkship, requiring no legal attainments, but revolts himself, as best he can, to the "bed he has made and has to lie upon."

O'Mara in the meanwhile reaps praises from the newspapers for the "reorganization" of the division.

During the Harrison Administration the scramble after plums kills the last of the writer's theories. He is disappointed in the enforced, and he accepts the advice of Mr. Macpherson to "join and help run" the Indiana Republican Association, but it runs him out of the service. Attacks are made on his qualifications for membership through the machinations of O'Mara, but an unexpected friend is found in Colonel Powell, the new assistant attorney general, and the writer wins in his fight for office in the association. He secures a transfer to the first division, and the division of Colonel Powell and is made happy by a chance to return to legal work. He undertakes the labor of compiling the laws which affect his department. In the meanwhile he brings from Indiana a girl "who had been trained to think the making of a home for her husband and her children the best work God could give her." Days begin in which the sun touches every leaf and blade of grass with gold.

The writer rejects a promising opportunity to return to his home town and practice law.

X.

SIX months' stir and confusion Republicanized the department. The men who had been "true," or "martyrs to their convictions," or were brothers to Congressmen, or had been "loyal to the organization," were all placed. Then, the party having been served, the official mind turned leisurely to its work.

Colonel Powell realigned his bureau with the same self-constraint which had marked his reception of me and the same generous results. In the room next to his own private office he gathered all the good lawyers on his roll. To each of these lawyers he assigned one feature of the bureau's labors. The other rooms were sorters and feeders. As cases came into the bureau these other clerks filed and grooved them so that they passed without delay to examination and decision. And every case which was in the least irregular was scrutinized by the Big Chief himself.

The effect was to expedite the decision of cases greatly and to do away altogether with the inaccuracies which had previously marred our work. Nevertheless, subordinates of the O'Mara stripe did not like the change. They did not find it pleasant being mail clerks, they said, and they were not slow in making themselves heard on the subject.

One day we all heard a crowd flew about our department like a whirlwind in the wind that the Secretary and the Big Chief were fighting it out over our reorganization. Half a dozen Senators had complained, it was said, that their favorites were not "taken care of." The report had it further that the Secretary himself was not any too much pleased when he learned that one of his subordinates had been playing checkers with his clerks without consulting the department's executive. I listened to it all with a sick heart. I thought I knew Colonel Powell pretty well, and I foresaw—or thought I foresaw—that he would leave the service before he would submit himself to supervision from every ward heeler or country demagogue who happened to be in Congress.

That day and the next passed anxiously. The assistant to the Attorney General moved in and out of the office serene, at first glance, as ever he had

been; but there was a light in his eye that made it hard to look into it squarely. The third day we came to work still anxious. But there was no news. Neither was there any the next day—or the next. We never did get any, in fact, until we realized that in the continuation of his realignment Colonel Powell had won his fight.

Reunion of Friends.

Our force of lawyers had been too small at first, and our force of clerks too large; we had had too many O'Maras and too few Macphersons. So the Big Chief brought into our room two other clerks—a young Irishman named Donnelly and Mr. Macpherson. That was a happy day for me. I laughed to myself and hummed all afternoon, thinking of my friends' vindication and the pleasure of telling the news to Annie. Old Taciturnity laughed, too, and took his seat at a desk near my window, with the happiest air I had ever known him to wear.

Strange to say, it was Donnelly's coming which stirred us most. He was as true a wearer of the green as O'Mara, and as shrewd; but for every falling which the division chief betrayed the newcomer had a bitter distaste. Even O'Mara's suavity and mild temper proved to Donnelly that his fellow was a "fourteen-hundred hypocrite." The first time the two came together, the division chief told the other, with fine emphasis, of his own success as a clerk and his prowess as an athlete. All the answer he got was this, delivered with an easy laugh that caught the attention of the whole room:

"The parrot that blow their own horns, Mister O'Mara, usually crawl out th' little ind."

I have long had a theory that enemies as an institution are passing out of the world. Most of us are too busy serving ourselves to pursue each other out of hatred. When we do harm to others it is for the sake of some material advantage.

An Irish Vendetta.

O'Mara and Donnelly were conspicuous exceptions to my rule. The latter's philosophy at the former's expense soon echoed all through the department. Then came a counter observation from O'Mara—that "Mister Donnelly (pronounced with the accent on the second syllable), would not be long makin' music of anny sartin on his harn in this department." Other love-messages followed thick. Obliging friends carried them while they were still hot. In less than a month the two hated each other bitterly.

This was the atmosphere in which I completed by compilation of the office laws. The work was decidedly exacting. Two searches were needed to establish every single phase of our practice. Where Congress had been specific, I had to examine the whole record of later departmental orders to see if Congress had not been superseded by something done "as the President shall determine;" and where the department had ruled finally I had to examine the whole record of later laws to see that it had not been overruled by Congress. Moreover, the volume taxed my literary abilities as heavily as my legal perception; for when the manuscript was ready for the printer a full half of it was my composition, either as a brief of the law or a description of the office practice.

Colonel Powell went over it with me, word by word. Sometimes we worked at the office, sometimes at his house, and sometimes on Sundays—at my house. The companionship proved extremely pleasant. The Big Chief knew the law as well, almost, as Mr. Macpherson, and was an excellent moot opponent. Every conclusion in the compilation he combated in every possible way, and when, at last, he marked "O. K." on the final chapter, I was happy in the confidence that my work had stood as exacting an inquiry as any court could give it.

The volume meant a great deal more to me than so many months' labor made it. It was the first notable thing I had accomplished for my profession. It was to be, I hoped, the opening of the door to many such accomplishments. Moreover, Annie had given her time to make it accurate, putting aside her sewing and her housework to hunt through old law books as dry as lime. And the long Sundays in our library or out under the trees, with Annie at one side of the table, sewing or hunting through reference books, our visitor leaning back in a seat I had built with my own tools, and reading my manuscript aloud to them both—they were as peaceful (and as useful) as any Sabbath days we might have spent in church.

So we found, when the work was done, that it had woven its thread into the pattern of our first year of married life. Like our furniture and our garden, we could not think of it and not mingle with it thoughts of that blessed, difficult, happy first year together.

Yet the joy passed out of it and left

our charts aching the instant the first proofs came. For the title page ascribed all the labor to the secretary and did not even mention my name. My heart was so heavy and my mind so dazed I could not, at first, grasp the situation. I spoke to Colonel Powell about it at once, and the answer he was—sympathetic and kind as it was—climbed my disappointment hopelessly.

"I understand exactly how you feel," he said. "It is something of a surprise to me, also. But this is the custom of the department. Everything issued by it bears the name of the Secretary and my superiors will not even consider adding your name to his." He paused almost imperceptibly before he continued: "I have thought you might find it hard to tell that little wife of yours. After you have told her, won't you let an old fellow like me come out to talk it over?"

And he did come. All the evening he sat in the little library where we three had worked so often, talking to us as though we were children (and maybe we were), reassuring Annie that my work was appreciated and comforting me with assurances that no adverse influence could down ability armed with grit. He narrowly caught his train; but when he said good-night he took time to pat the little wife's elbows as her father might have done. We stood with the door open for a moment, looking at the

With that new interest ahead, the wife forgot her fears for the future, and set about contentedly to make the house ready. We bought some lumber from the saw-mill, that I might make a dressing table, and Annie gathered pieces from every source to make a quilt. For a month I planned and sawed and hammered, while my gentle wife snipped and basted, and sewed.

I should have been studying instead. This was to be my third year in the law school, the only year that did not deal with the law chiefly as a review of what I had learned at home. When a

could pay cash for it; otherwise he had to charge us full price for a ton delivered at a time. We would have been glad to choose the first method, but we could not, and before we knew it we were \$20 behind with the second. Our provision bill also went up with a bound. We were feeding four, now, instead of two, and with a new cook—accustomed to country plenty—who used butter, lard, eggs and milk with a prodigal inability to appreciate their cost.

Four other bills worried me greatly: We had still to pay about \$50 on our furniture; my law school cost me \$10 a month; to please Annie I bought some new clothes before our two mothers came—that was \$50 more; and while at work on my compilation I undertook to buy on installments an encyclopedia of law—that was \$150 more. The payments on these accounts amounted to \$40 a month. My income was \$100 a month. When I deducted the money due on installments, therefore, we had left for our living expenses only \$60. Yet our rent, coal, and provisions at that time, with my commutation charges and the incessant buying of sewing material, more than consumed \$100 a month.

Putting Off the Collectors.

This burst upon me when I first found it necessary to put off the collectors. We had begun housekeeping determined to keep out of debt. We kept our provision bills paid as regularly as the day

in nervous fear that every messenger from the Secretary's office was sent to conduct me to my creditors. I kept away from the street of the furniture store, and I made a detour on my way to the station to escape the tailor. But no subterfuges could carry peace to my mind. Nothing but money could do that.

At home I tried to be cheerful, and I was. It is very strange, I think, that when the heart is chilled through and through a man can nevertheless forget all about his trouble if only he tries to do so for the sake of somebody else. I was trying for Annie's sake.

One day the messenger came—from Mr. Chamberlain. He told me simply that a tailor had filed a complaint against me. That, he said, was his official duty. As he spoke he crossed from his chair, came around the desk to me, who stood there so humiliated I could not speak, and caught me by the elbow.

A Friend in Need.

"Look here, lad," he said, with his eyes on the floor, "you are in a pretty tight fix, aren't you? Why don't you borrow money and pay this fellow? Don't be afraid to speak up. That would help you, wouldn't it? How much do you need to tide you over this month? Thirty dollars? Why, I'll lend it to you in a minute."

He had his check book out instantly. He was writing in it before I could

wife. It will do you no good to ask me—waving me toward his door—"I promised Mr. Chamberlain I would not tell. But I guess you might just as well go home now and find out. You will not be worth much here today."

When I reached home I found the little wife propped up against the pillows and a promise of her old color in her cheeks. She held out a letter to me with both hands, exclaiming as I came into the room:

"Oh, Philip, read it—read it. I think everybody in the world is trying to be kind to us."

I did read—these words, swimming and blurred toward the end in spite of their stilt and sharp-pointed penmanship:

"To the Mother of the New Little Girl and the Wife of Philip Schuyler: 'Two old men send you their best wishes and the little daughter their best congratulations. They think not many babies are born to so beautiful a childhood. They want you both to know how highly they esteem the little girl's father, and they think it may help you (especially the baby) if you know that the department has raised his salary \$200 a year. He earned this by making our office laws so clear that even old men with bad eyes can see through them. That is the chief reason why we are glad to send you this news, and to subscribe ourselves, dear madam, Your very humble servants,

"HENRY W. POWELL,
"JULIUS C. CHAMBERLAIN."

Trap Sprung on O'Mara.

Each blessing has so far foretold another. The coming of the little daughter, the convalescence of the mother, the increase of my salary, the kindness of my superiors, had all been links in a chain. The end was not yet. News greeted me at the office which, while of vastly less importance than any of these items, was still laden with relief. It was that O'Mara had been summoned before the Secretary on charges.

The office gossips explicated half a score of different accusations. Mr. O'Mara had defaulted with the funds of his athletic association. He had endorsed certain office papers fraudulently. He had written a letter attacking Colonel Powell. He had engaged on a regular campaign to have that official discredited.

I learned the truth from Mr. Macpherson, who had it from the appointment clerk, who had it in turn from the Secretary's confidential stenographer. O'Mara was accused, and substantially convicted by his own handwriting, of gross insubordination.

The charge originated with Donnelly, who had been watching the division chief like the good mouse he was. He had noted a reprint of the law pamphlet in typewriting in frequent use among O'Mara's clerks. The division chief, he said, had those clerks were forwarding fewer and fewer cases for the inspection of the law clerk.

Thereupon he sprung his trap. He had an attorney decoy O'Mara with a letter making complaint at some pretended delay. The division chief, as he was, put his foot on the spring and answered the attorney over his own signature, explaining that the delay was due to certain recent changes in bureau methods, that despite the changes, he would try to speed up the work as much as affecting this attorney, and that the attorney would do well, in the future, to write Mr. O'Mara personally.

The attorney, more or less genuinely dumfounded, sent this letter to the Secretary without comment, and when its author first heard that it had been returned to the office, it was in explanation of an order that he show cause why he should not be removed from the Secretary's office with Congressmen.

Next, he renewed his old siege of the Secretary's office with Congressmen. He formally explained that it was a mistake due to overzeal in behalf of the service. When all these shots failed, he fired his last shot by having one of his Senatorial supporters have the whole proceeding quashed on condition that he resign.

He "Falls on His Feet."

So O'Mara, the upstart, liar, apostate, incompetent, and disorganized, left the service with his head high, with flowers on the desk he had demeaned, and with his self-esteem apparently unshaken. He had risen suddenly, and he fell suddenly. That was the way of the world, and O'Mara was too much a man of the world to be surprised. But he fell on his feet. If he had not been so fooled this time as he had fooled them once before, at least none of them printed the version of the incident which they obtained from the Secretary. Within a week he had been made the District agent for a great contracting company.

And the papers published that. Surely all this—from the great blessings at home to the lesser ones in the office—should have made me altogether happy. Yet it did not. Every joy was mingled with worry. I was not at home when I talked with Annie the thought of money broke in so ruthlessly that I found myself counting their cost. Every dish of food represented so much of a bill at the grocer's. Every shovelful of coal harrowed my conscience.

And every day my trouble was leaping on. The living expenses grew instead of decreasing. The doctor's bill was already greater than our debt for furniture. We had employed a trained nurse for two weeks at \$2 a week. Before a month could possibly have gone by the installment men had swooped down on me again, and I was able to guard them off only by paying them and keeping the supply men waiting. Even the increase in my salary suggested debt to escape; the whole year's advance paid to me now in cash would not meet the bills already due.

When I looked out of doors those days and saw other men in warm clothes walking happily, every one of them secure against debt and free from the torment of debt, I turned from the windows with my heart as bitter against the rich and as full of hate as any socialist ever was. I have never loved money in my life, but I came near it then. I was snit in by debt.

(To Be Continued Next Sunday.)

It Fills the Bill.

To the Editor of The Washington Times: "The Life of a Department Clerk" is true to nature. It fills the bill. I think his going to housekeeping a portrayal equal to Dickens' best effort. Keep it up. The clerks are much interested and it is making a big hit. P. T. R. May 22.



"With Annie at one side of the table sewing and I reading my manuscript aloud to them both."

"Down in the Mouth."

The year was harder after that. We had to keep a sharp watch on ourselves not to become despondent. Annie was unnaturally depressed, but she fought so bravely against her low spirits that I could hardly bear to look on. I was almost discouraged—and every month made the course rougher.

We had a letter about this time, from Mrs. Bell telling us that she and my mother planned to visit us for a month or two "in the dead of winter." Annie's mother said she could not stay away any longer, her daughter's letters had been too "down in the mouth," and my mother said she was coming to teach Annie how to make salt-rising bread.

man's mother comes to make him a visit, however, and his mother-in-law comes along, too, he is quick to bend all his energies making ready.

Our "two old women" fitted themselves into our home before they had done unpacking their trunks. My mother took charge of the kitchen and began on dinner. Mrs. Bell looked over Annie's sewing, and drew enough white cloth out of her trunk to tent a regiment, and in a moment my mother was running upstairs to look over it also. It was half an hour before the inspection ended, and when those three women came down to me their faces were all bright with mysterious smiles.

I do not remember that it was especially cold that winter. But I have no doubt whatever that our coal bills were enormous. Our supply came from an agent at the next suburban station, and I gave up my law school on enough to last us all winter if I

came on the calendar. Our concession as to furniture was, as far as we could see, reasonable and cautious. The clothes and books—which were upon us before we really understood the burden they meant—did not involve us for large payments. It was clearly the simple visit of these two loving women, which produced this crisis and compelled us to choose between paying cash for the necessities and meeting obligations which we thought might as well be held over.

The furniture man came twice within a week with a statement that he must report "my case" to the head of the department if I did not pay promptly. The book man told me to take my own time. The tailor answered my excuses with a curt "You'd no business to buy 'th' clothes if you couldn't pay for 'em." And I gave up my law school on enough to last us all winter if I

had three children now, and our daughter is in the high school. But to this day when I think of my coming to Washington and the longing of those early years, that picture dims my glasses and carries me back with a start to the old ideals. I call it my confession.

I was away from the office nearly a week. When I went back, the clerks all jumped up and grinned my hand, asking me with the kindest motives how I liked being a father, and the other idiotic questions men ask at such a time. Colonel Powell rang for me at once. It was to inquire after Annie as though she had been the Queen of England, and to tell me that Mrs. Powell had sent out to our house a basket fitted with toilet things for the little girl's bath. He sent me out of the room with this: "Mr. Chamberlain and I had something else for the little newcomer, but we want you to hear of it from your

burden was very heavy. I lived